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FDA Warns Consumers to Avoid Drinking Raw Milk

Following an outbreak in the state of Washington, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is warning the public against drinking raw milk because it may contain harmful bacteria that can cause life-threatening illnesses. Raw milk is not treated or pasteurized to remove disease-causing bacteria.

The risk of drinking raw milk was most recently demonstrated in Washington State by an outbreak associated with raw milk containing the bacteria called *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 (*E. coli*). To date, eight illnesses have been reported in Washington state, several of which were in children. Two of the children remain hospitalized. Health authorities have identified locally sold raw milk as a source of the outbreak, and have ordered the unlicensed dairy to shut down.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 300 people in the United States became ill by drinking raw milk or eating cheese made from raw milk in 2001, and nearly 200 became ill from these products in 2002.

Symptoms of *E. coli* O157:H7 illness include stomach cramps and diarrhea, including bloody diarrhea. *E. coli* O157:H7 disease sometimes leads to a serious complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS), which can cause kidney failure. People typically become ill two to five days after eating contaminated food. People who have developed those symptoms after consuming unpasteurized milk should seek immediate medical attention.

Pasteurization is the only effective method for eliminating the bacteria in raw milk and milk products. Pasteurization uses heat applied for a length of time sufficient to destroy harmful bacteria such as *E. coli* O157:H7 without significantly changing milk's nutritional value. There is no meaningful difference in the nutritional value of pasteurized and unpasteurized milk. Pasteurization can also prevent such contagious diseases as tuberculosis, diphtheria, polio, Q fever, salmonellosis, strep throat, scarlet fever, and typhoid fever that can be spread by bacteria in milk. The law requires all milk shipped between states to be pasteurized.

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